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ABSTRACT

This digest argues that free, public libraries foster and fortify democracy and democratic citizenship. Because libraries offer services and materials representing many points of view, they allow citizens to fulfill their civic and personal responsibilities and to exercise their liberties. Particularly for former communist countries, libraries can provide citizens access to previously restricted information, allowing them to participate in the democratic process with a more informed perspective and voice. A variety of programs through which U.S. libraries can aid library systems throughout the world can and thus strengthen the democratic climates abroad are listed. The digest includes a list of four sources for information about libraries and democracy. A 12-item bibliography concludes the document.

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Libraries and Democracy

by Laura A. Pinhey

Libraries in the United States of America have long cultivated democratic environments. The foundation of our public library system is built on the assumption that access to information should be free and open to all. Indeed, libraries take a democratic stance toward not only the persons they serve, but also toward the very materials they provide: to offer materials representing all points of view on a given topic, freedom of expression, and freedom of access are all principles of library philosophy. It follows that libraries, microcosms of democracy, are integral to a truly democratic society.

How Libraries Foster Democracy in the United States. Public libraries provide access for all persons to a variety of information and ideas. Citizens, therefore, have enhanced opportunities for self-improvement and empowerment.

Perhaps even more significant to the democratic function of libraries is that much of what can be found in public libraries today is related to democratic civic activity, such as social and community services referral; information about community organizations; exhibit space and meeting areas for individuals and groups of all kinds; Internet access; adult literacy programs; tax forms and volunteer tax advisers; voter registration forms; and public word processors, printers, and typewriters. The existence of these services, which transcend what are generally thought of as traditional library ministrations, underscore just how crucial the role of libraries is in sustaining a democratic state; all of them allow citizens to fulfill their civic and personal responsibilities and to exercise their liberties.

Libraries in the World's New Democracies. Libraries are an essential component of the global resurgence of democracy, which has been underway since the 1970s. They have helped citizens to participate more fully and effectively in their democracy, to make informed choices about government, and, by connecting them with appropriate resources, to educate themselves for personal and occupational success and fulfillment, possibilities withheld from them until very recently. And at a time when young democracies must stretch their scarce financial resources to meet just basic needs, a library's cost-benefit ratio is high: the purchase of new library materials allows access for many citizens to a wealth of information at relatively little cost. In these ways, libraries have helped to vitalize new democracies and move them toward authenticity.

Certainly, the transition from a totalitarian state to a genuine democracy is an enormous struggle in many ways. Overwhelming economic, social, political, cultural, and even emotional and mental hurdles challenge the citizens and governments of emerging democracies. There is never any guarantee that, somewhere along the path to realized democracy, a nation will not backslide to a totalitarian form of government. There are citizens and members of government in every emerging democracy who would like to see a return to communism. Such deep potential for instability only intensifies other challenges to a secure democracy.

Especially in Eastern Europe, decades of communist rule have eroded trust in the accuracy and value of information and created a belief that such information is available only to elites, as it was during the period of communist rule. For years, only officially sanctioned material was available to the general public, and such material was, of course, largely propaganda (Gifford 1995). Libraries existed to limit and control public access to information, and to channel readers' intellectual curiosities and needs (Kuzmin 1993). Information and libraries were tools of the totalitarian state, so neither could be trusted. Moreover, the communist ideology made self-discipline, self-motivation, ambition, and similar attributes unnecessary and undesirable in the eyes of the state; the practice of such virtues by any individual or group would seriously conflict with the function of the regime. Understandably, such deeply-ingrained distrust and the individual and societal effects of long-term repression do not diminish easily; they present considerable barriers in connecting citizens with libraries today.

Linking libraries with democratic citizenship is, of course, not the only test facing libraries in emerging democracies. Financial and technological woes beleaguer them, too. Despite these difficulties, libraries in new democracies are managing to revamp and refocus. They are gathering accurate sources of history unavailable during the communist era. They are discarding the mountains of communist propaganda crowding their buildings (IGLA 1994). They are luring back formerly dissatisfied users in nations where book prices have skyrocketed and the publishing industry now shuns production of items such as encyclopedias, literary classics, and technical and scientific research materials in favor of mass market books (Kuzmin 1993). Ministries and other government agencies now enjoy in-house information services that facilitate their functions (IGLA 1994). Bibliographies of Eastern European publications issued between 1948 and 1988 are being compiled; plans for these bibliographies to be made available electronically are underway (Gifford 1995). To curtail duplication and encourage sharing of library resources, Central and Eastern European libraries are taking inventory of their holdings and exploring ways to exchange that information using the growing Global Information Infrastructure (Borgman 1995). In short, libraries are making the most of their situation by doing what they can with what they have. Indeed, such resourcefulness and determination are basic to any successful democracy.

How Libraries in the United States Can Help Insure Democracy at Home and Abroad. Efforts by American libraries to aid library systems abroad can benefit everyone. Strong democracies make the world a safer, more peaceful place for us all. American libraries can reinforce their supporting role in our own democracy and expand the capabilities of libraries in new democracies to support and educate their citizenry and to fortify their government through many actions (Schecter 1990):

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- Participating in staff exchange programs with libraries in developing democracies.
- Encouraging library and information science organizations to lobby Congress for aid programs for library development in emerging democracies.
- Using evolving telecommunications technologies to share with librarians in other nations experiences and resources that will help develop quality library service.
- Striving to meet local community activity and information needs by providing meeting space for community organizations and by referring citizens to such organizations and services.
- Providing support for formal education, scholarly research, and independent learning.
- Developing interest in reading and learning in preschool children.
- Furnishing reference works on citizenship, current events, constitutional law, government, politics, and public policy issues.

Sources of Information about Libraries and Democracy. Public libraries are present in all democratic systems (Hafner and Sterling-Folker 1993), which points to just how inextricably linked libraries and democracy really are. Some groups involved in working to strengthen the role of libraries in democracy are:

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)
P.O.B. 95312
2509 CH The Hague
The Hague, Netherlands
Telephone: 31-70-314-0884 Fax: 31-70-383-4827

American Library Association
50 E. Huron St.
Chicago, IL 60611
Telephone: 800-545-2433 Fax: (312) 944-3897

American Society for Information Science (ASIS)
8720 Georgia Ave. Suite 501
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Telephone: (301) 495-0900 Fax: (301) 495-0810

The Library Association
7 Ridgmont St.
London
WC1E 7AE

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the information provided or requested through Interlibrary Loan.

Borgman, Christine L. "Information Retrieval or Information Morass? Implications of Library Automation and Computing Networks in Central and Eastern Europe for the Creation of a Global Information Infrastructure." PROCEEDINGS OF THE 58TH ASIS ANNUAL MEETING (Chicago, Illinois, October 9-12, 1995), Vol. 32. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc. for the American Society for Information Science, 1995. EJ 513 851

EMERGING DEMOCRACIES AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION. Proceedings of a Conference of the International Groups of the Library Association (IGLA) Oxford, September 1994. London: Library Association Pub., 1995.

Gifford, Prosser. "The Libraries of Eastern Europe: Information and Democracy." In FUTURE LIBRARIES, edited by Prosser Gifford. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

Hafner, Arthur W. and Jennifer Sterling-Folker. "Democratic Ideals and the American Public Library." In DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, edited by Arthur W. Hafner. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993.

Henson, Jane E., ed. LIBRARIES: LINK TO LEARNING. FINAL REPORT, INDIANA GOVERNOR'S CONFERENCE ON LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SERVICES (2nd, Indianapolis, Indiana, November 16-18, 1990). Indianapolis, IN: The Conference, 1991. ED 343 602.

Kuzmin, Evgeny. "From Totalitarianism to Democracy: Russian Libraries in Transition." AMERICAN LIBRARIES 24 (June 1993): 568-70. EJ 464 405.

Marston, Betty. "Libraries and Democracy: Information For All." WILSON LIBRARY BULLETIN 65 (March 1991): 47-49. EJ 426 083.

Sager, Donald J. "Third World Libraries: Is There An American Role?" PUBLIC LIBRARIES 33 (September/October 1994): 243-247. EJ 491 581

Schechter, Stephen L. "The Library as a Source of Civic Literacy." THE BOOKMARK 48 (Spring 1990): 176-182.

Schuman, Patricia. "Your Right to Know: Librarians Make It Happen." WILSON LIBRARY BULLETIN 66 (November 1991): 38-41. EJ 436 332.

Sochocky, Christine M. "Undoing the Legacy of the Soviet Era." AMERICAN LIBRARIES 25 (July-August 1994): 684-86. EJ 488 371.

White, Charles S. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE INFORMED CITIZEN: NEW CHALLENGES FOR GOVERNMENT AND LIBRARIES. ERIC Digest. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1991. ED 331 528.

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